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Hofmannsthal, Hugo von

Electra : a tragedy in one act



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# **ELECTRA**





# ELECTRA

A TRAGEDY IN ONE ACT

BY

HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL

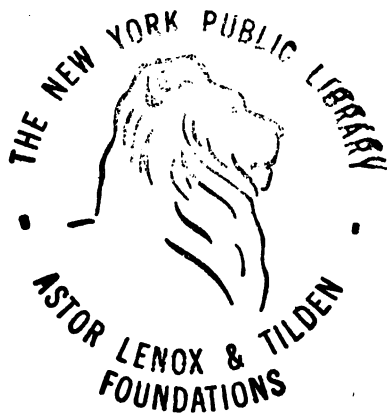
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ARTHUR SYMONS



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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CLYTEMNESTRA

ELECTRA

CHRYSOthemis

} *Her daughters*

AEGISTHUS

ORESTES

THE FOSTER FATHER OF ORESTES

THE WAITING WOMAN

THE TRAIN BEARER

A YOUNG SERVING MAN

AN OLD SERVING MAN

THE COOK

THE OVERSEER OF THE SERVING WOMEN

THE SERVING WOMEN



# ELECTRA

*The scene represents the inner court, bounded by the back of the Palace and by low buildings in which the Servants live.*

SERVING WOMEN at the draw-well, in front on the left. OVERSEERS among them.

FIRST SERVING WOMAN, raising her pitcher

WHERE does Electra bide?

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

It is her hour,  
The hour when she cries out upon her father,  
Till all the walls ring with it.

[ELECTRA comes running out of the door of the inner hall, which is already dark. ALL turn towards her. She springs back like a wild beast into its lair, one arm before her face.]

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

Did you see how she stared upon us?

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

She is, as a wild cat.

Spiteful

[ 7 ]

# ELECTRA

## THIRD SERVING WOMAN

Just now she lay  
And groaned —

## FIRST SERVING WOMAN

She always lies and groans like that  
When the sun 's low.

## THIRD SERVING WOMAN

And then we went too far  
And came too close to her.

## FIRST SERVING WOMAN

She cannot stand it  
If one but merely looks at her.

## THIRD SERVING WOMAN

We came  
Too close to her. Then she screeched out like a cat  
Upon us: "Off, you flies, begone!" she cried.

## FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

"Muck-flies, begone!"

## THIRD SERVING WOMAN

"Settle not on my wounds!"  
And struck out at us with a wisp of straw.

# ELECTRA

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

"Muck-flies, begone!"

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

"You shall not feed upon  
The sweetness of the torment. You shall not snatch  
The foam from off my agony."

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

"Crawl away!"  
She cried upon us. "Eat sweet and eat fat,  
And sneak to bed, you and your men," cried she.  
And you —

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

I was not idle —

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

Gave her her answer.

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

Yes: "If you're hungry," was my answer to her,  
"So do you too"; then leapt she and shot out  
A horrid scowl, and crooked her finger at us  
Like a big claw, and cried: "I feed," she cried,  
"A vulture in my body!"

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

What did you say?

[ 9 ]



# ELECTRA

## THIRD SERVING WOMAN

"That 's why," I gave her back, "you always squat  
Where carrion 's to be smelt, and why you scratch  
After a long-dead body!"

## SECOND SERVING WOMAN

What did she say?

## THIRD SERVING WOMAN

She only screamed and cast  
Back to her corner.

*[THEY have finished drawing the water.]*

## FIRST SERVING WOMAN

That the Queen should let  
This sort of demon free in house and court  
To live there as it likes her!

## SECOND SERVING WOMAN

Her own child!

## FIRST SERVING WOMAN

Were she my child, by God, I 'd put her soon  
Safe under bolt and bar.

## FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

Do you not think  
They are hard enough on her? Do they not set

[ 10 ]

## ELECTRA

Her platter with the dogs? (*In a low voice.*)  
Have you not seen  
The master strike her?

~~FIFTH SERVING WOMAN~~, a quite young one,  
with a tremulous, sensitive voice

Surely I will cast  
Myself before her, I will kiss her feet.  
Is she not a king's daughter, and endures  
So sore an outrage! Surely I will anoint  
Her feet and I will wipe them with my hair.

OVERSEER

In with you! (*Pushes her.*)

FIFTH SERVING WOMAN

There is nothing in the world  
So royal as she is. She lies in rags  
Upon the threshold, ay, but there is none (*she*  
*shouts*),  
None in the house that can endure to look  
Into her eyes.

OVERSEER

In with you! (*Pushes her in through the open door*  
*to L.*)

FIFTH SERVING WOMAN, caught in the door

You are not worthy  
To breathe the air she breathes. Would I could see

# ELECTRA

The lot of you strung up here by the neck  
In any dark old granary, for all this  
You have done here to Electra!

OVERSEER, *shuts the door and sets her back  
against it*

Do you hear that?

We, to Electra? When they bade her sit  
And eat with us, she thrust her bowl away,  
She spat upon us, and she called us dogs.

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

Eh! what she said was: there is not any dog  
A man could make so abject; and that we  
With water, always with fresh water, wash  
The eternal blood of murder from the floor.

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

And that we sweep the offence, she said, the offence  
That comes again, day by day, night by night,  
Into its corner.

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

And our bodies, cried she,  
Stiffen to the dirt we are in bondage to.  
[*They carry their pitchers into the house  
to L.*]

OVERSEER, *who has fastened the door after them*

And if she sees us with our children: nought,  
Nought can be so accursed, she cries on us,

[ 12 ]

# ELECTRA

As children, we have littered in this house,  
Slipping in blood upon the stairs like dogs.  
Did she say this or not?

SERVING WOMEN, *within*

Yes, yes!

ONE, *from within*

They strike me!

[*The OVERSEER goes in.*

[*ELECTRA comes out of the house. She is alone with the red flickerings of light which fall through the branches of the fig-trees and drop like blood-stains on the ground and on the walls.*

ELECTRA

Alone! Woe's me, alone! My father gone,  
Thrust down in his cold pit. (*Towards the ground.*)

Where are you, father? Have you not the strength  
To lift your face and look on me again?

It is the hour, father, it is our hour;

The hour when these two slaughtered you, your wife

And he who lay in the same bed with her,

Your kingly bed. They struck you in your bath,

Dead: and your blood ran over both your eyes,

And all the bed steamed with the blood; then he,

The coward, took you by your shoulders, dragged  
you

[ 18 ]

## ELECTRA

Out of the room, head foremost, and both legs  
After it trailing; and your eyes, wide open,  
Staring behind them, saw into the house.  
Thus you return, and set (*she sees him*) foot before  
foot,

And suddenly you are here, with both your eyes  
Wide open, and a royal diadem  
Of purple is about your brow, and feeds  
Upon the open wound there. Father! I will  
See you: O, leave me not to-day alone,  
Were it no more than yesterday, come back,  
A shadow in yonder corner, to your child!  
Father, your day will come. Time is cast down  
By the sure stars, so surely shall the blood  
Out of a hundred throats cast down your grave  
As from a pitcher spilt upon the ground  
It streams out of the shackled murderers  
And round the naked bodies of their helpers,  
Like marble pitchers, all, women and men;  
And in one wave, in one wide swollen stream,  
Shall their life's life gush out of them; and we  
Will slaughter your horses for you and gather them  
About your grave, and they shall snuff up death  
And neigh in the wind of death, and die; and we  
Will slaughter the dogs for you, because the dogs  
Are litter of the litter of that pack  
That hunted with you, and would lick your feet  
And you would cast them morsels; therefore must  
Their blood be shed for you, and we, your blood,  
Your son Orestes and your daughters, we  
These three, when all is done, and there arises  
Canopied purple from your streaming blood,  
The sun sucks upward, then we three, your blood,

## ELECTRA

Will dance about your grave; and I will lift  
Knee after knee above the heap of dead  
Step by step higher, and all who see me dance,  
Yea, all who see my shadow from afar  
Dancing, shall say: Behold how great a king  
Here holds high festival of his flesh and blood,  
And happy is he about whose mighty grave  
His children dance so royal a dance of triumph!

*[CHRYSOTHEMIS, the younger sister,  
stands in the doorway of the inner court.  
She looks anxiously at ELECTRA, and calls  
softly.]*

### CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra!

*[ELECTRA turns round, like a night-wanderer, who hears his name called. She staggers. Her eyes look about her as if she saw nothing as it was. Her face distorts as she sees the anxious look of her sister. CHRYSOTHEMIS stands squeezed in the door.]*

### ELECTRA

Ah, the face!

### CHRYSOTHEMIS

Is my face then  
So hateful to you?

[ 15 ]

# ELECTRA

ELECTRA

What do you want? Speak out,  
Say it, empty it all, then go away  
And leave me.

[CHRYSTHEMIS *puts up her hands as if  
to ward off a blow.*

ELECTRA

Why do you lift up your hands?  
So lifted up our father both his hands  
When the axe fell on them and clove his flesh.  
What do you want, daughter of my mother?

CHRYSTHEMIS

They are about to do some dreadful thing.

ELECTRA

Both women?

CHRYSTHEMIS

Who?

ELECTRA

Why, one of them 's my mother,  
And there 's that other woman, the coward one,  
The valiant murder-monger, why, Ægisthus,  
The doer of heroic deeds, in bed,  
What are they going to do?

[ 16 ]

# ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS

To shut you up  
In a dark tower, where you would never see  
The light of sun or moon.

[ELECTRA *laughs*.  
They will, I know,

For I have heard it.

ELECTRA

I seem to have heard it too.  
Was it not said when the last dish went round  
At table? Then he is wont to raise his voice  
And brag about his bravery, and, I wager,  
'T is good for his digestion.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Not at table  
He did not brag about it. He and she  
Spoke of it all alone.

ELECTRA

Alone? how then  
Could you have heard it?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

At the door, Electra.

ELECTRA

Let there be no doors opened in this house!  
Laboring breath, pah! and the gasp of  
strangling:

[ 17 ]



## ELECTRA

There's nothing in these rooms but that. Let be  
The door, when there's a groaning heard within.  
It cannot be that they are always killing,  
Sometimes they are alone together, even!  
Open no doors here. Do not prowl about.  
Sit on the ground, like me, and wish for death.  
And judgment upon her and upon him.

### CHREYSOthemis

I cannot sit and stare into the dark,  
As you do; there is a fire within my breast  
That drives me all about the house, and not  
A room is tolerable to me, but I from one  
To another threshold must go up, go down;  
Each seems to call to me, and as I come,  
An empty room stares back at me. I have  
So sore a torment in me that my knees  
Shake under me by day and night, my throat  
Is tightened and I cannot even weep.  
All turns to stone. Sister, have pity! ✓

### ELECTRA

On whom?

### CHREYSOthemis

*dec. 1890*  
You it is who have welded me to the ground  
With iron clamps. If it were not for you  
They would have let us out. But for your hate,  
Your sleepless and immitigable mind,  
That makes them tremble, they would have let us  
out,  
Out of this prison, sister! I will go out.

[ 18 ]

## ELECTRA

I will not sleep here every night till death,  
And I will live before I come to die,  
I will bear children, ere my body withers,  
And though they mate me with a peasant, yet  
I will bear him children, and warm them with my  
body  
In the cold night when storms are on the hut.  
But this will I endure no more, to herd  
With menials, being no kin of theirs, shut in  
With very pangs of death by day and night.  
Do you hear me, sister! Speak!

ELECTRA

Poor creature!

CHRYSOthemis

Nay!

Have pity on yourself and me. Who profits,  
Electra, from this anguish? Not our father.  
Our father is dead. Our brother does not come.  
You see that all this time he does not come.  
Time graves its token on your face and mine  
Day after day, and, there, without, the sun  
Rises and sets and women I have known  
When they were slender are now big with blessing,  
And at the well can scarcely lift their jars;  
Then, in a little, their burdens being off,  
Come to the well again, and out of them  
Runs a sweet draught, and on them sucks and  
hangs

A young life, and they see their children grow;  
But we sit all alone upon our perch

## ELECTRA

Like captive birds, and turn our heads to left  
And right, and no man comes, no brother comes,  
No news of any brother, and no news  
Of any news, nothing. Better be dead  
Than living and not live. No, no, I am  
A woman, and I would have a woman's lot. }

### ELECTRA

Shame on the thought of it, shame to speak of it!  
To be the hollow where the murderer  
After the murder takes his rest; to play  
The beast that one may give a worse beast pleasure!  
She slept with one, ah, and she laid her breast  
Across his eyes, and nodded to another  
That from behind the bed with axe and net  
Crept out.

### CHRYSOthemis

You are too horrible, Electra!

### ELECTRA

Why am I horrible? Are you such a woman?  
You will become one.

### CHRYSOthemis

Can you not forget?  
My head is all a void. I can remember  
Nothing out of day until to-morrow.  
Sometimes I lie so, then am I again  
What I was once, and cannot make out why

## ELECTRA

I am no longer young. Where is it all?  
This is not water, that runs always past,  
This is no thread which on the shuttle flies,  
Hither and thither, it is I, yes, I.  
I would fain pray some god to set a light  
Within my breast that I might find myself  
Again within me. Were I but away  
How soon would I forget all these bad dreams!

### ELECTRA

Forget? what, am I then a beast? Forget?  
The beast will fall to sleep, within its mouth  
Its prey half eaten; the beast forgets itself  
And sets a-chewing while death throttles it;  
The beast forgets what came out of its body  
And stays its hunger on its young; but I,  
I am no beast, and I cannot forget.

### CHEYSOTHEMIS

O must my soul forever on this food  
Be fed, this food it loathes, it loathes so much  
It shudders at the smell of it; this food  
It should not ever touch, nor ever know  
That there was anything so full of horror;  
Not see it with the eyes, not hearken to it.  
This terror is too dreadful for men's hearts.  
When it draws near to us and takes hold on us,  
Then must we flee away into the houses,  
Into the vineyards, up into the hills,  
And if it follow us into the hills  
We must come down and burrow in the houses;

## ELECTRA

Not dare abide with it, not be with it  
In the same house. I will go, I will go away,  
I will conceive and I will bring forth children,  
That shall know nothing of it, I will wash  
My body in that water, plunge deep, deep  
My body in that water, wash all over,  
Wash clean both my eye-sockets; they shall not  
fear  
When they look up into their mother's eyes.

ELECTRA, *scornfully*

When they look up into their mother's eyes!  
How will you look our father in the eyes?

CHRYSTHEMIS

Stop!

ELECTRA

May your children, when you have them, do  
So unto you as you unto our father.

[CHRYSTHEMIS *cries out*.

Why do you cry? Get in. Your place is there.  
I hear a noise. Is it your wedding-feast  
They set in order? I can hear them running.  
Why, the whole house is up. They are in birth-  
pangs  
Or at a murder. They must be at a murder  
When they have no dead body for a bed.

CHRYSTHEMIS

Stop! That is past and over.

[ 22 ]

# ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Past and over?  
They fall to some new matter there within.  
Do you think I do not know the sound when bodies  
Are trailed upon the stairs, and there is whispering  
And wringing out of cloths that drop with blood?

CHRYSOthemis

Sister, let us begone from here.

ELECTRA

This time  
I will be by, and not as I was then.  
I am strong this time. I will cast myself  
Upon her, wrest the axe out of her hand,  
Swing the axe over her —

CHRYSOthemis

Go, hide yourself,  
Lest she should see you. Do not cross her path  
To-day. She scatters death in every glance.  
She has been dreaming.

*[The noise of many PEOPLE approaching  
comes nearer.]*

Go away from here,  
Go, they are coming through the corridor.  
They are coming by this way. She has been  
dreaming;  
I know not what, I heard it from her women,  
I do not know, sister, if it is true;  
They say she has been dreaming of Orestes,

[ 23 ]

## ELECTRA

And that she has been crying in her sleep,  
As one cries out being strangled.

### ELECTRA

It is I,  
I, that have sent him to her. From my breast  
I sent the dream to her. I lie and hear  
The feet of him who follows her. I hear  
His feet go through the room, I hear him lift  
The curtain of the bed; crying, she leaps forth,  
But he is after her; and down the stairs  
Through vault and vault and vault the hunt goes  
on.

It is much darker now than night, and much  
Darker and much more quiet than the grave;  
She pants and staggers in the darkness, yet  
He is still after her; he shakes the torch  
On this side and on that side of the axe.  
And I am like a hound upon her heels;  
And if she seeks a hole I spring upon her  
Sideways, and so we drive her on and on  
Till a wall shuts upon us, and there, deep  
In that dense darkness (yet I see him there,  
A shadow, and his limbs and eyeballs) sits  
Our father, and he heeds not, yet it must  
Be done; we drive her in before his feet;  
Then falls the axe.

*[Torches and FIGURES fill the corridor to  
L. of door.]*

### CHRYSOthemis

They are here already, and she drives her women  
Before her, all with torches, and they drag

## ELECTRA

Beasts with them and the sacrificial knife.  
She is most deadly, sister, when she trembles,  
As she does now. O do not cross her path  
For this one day, only for this one hour!

### ELECTRA

I have a mind to speak now with my mother  
As I have never spoken.

*[Against the brightly lighted corridor shuffles and clatters a hurrying PROCESSION. There is a tugging and hauling of beasts, a smothered chiding, a quickly stifled cry, the swish of a whip, a pulling back and staggering forward.]*

### CHRYSOthemis

I will not hear it.

*[She goes in through the door of the court. CLYTEMNESTRA appears in the wide window. In the glare of the torches her sallow and bloated face looks whiter above her scarlet dress. She leans on her WAITING WOMAN, who is dressed in dark violet, and on an ivory staff incrustated with precious stones. A yellow FIGURE with dark hair combed back, like an Egyptian, and a smooth face like an erect snake, bears her train. The QUEEN is bedecked all over with precious stones and talismans. Her arms are covered by bracelets, her fingers glitter with rings. Her eyelids seem unnaturally heavy, and she seems to keep them*

[ 25 ]



## ELECTRA

*open with a great effort. ELECTRA stands rigid and still, her face turned towards the window. CLYTEMNESTRA suddenly opens her eyes and, trembling with anger, goes to the window and points with her staff at ELECTRA.*

CLYTEMNESTRA, *at the window*

What do you want? See it now, how it rears  
Its swollen neck and darts its tongue at me!  
See what I have let loose in my own house.  
If she could only kill me with her eyes!  
O Gods, why do ye weigh on me so sore,  
Why do ye waste me so intolerably?  
Why must my strength be sacrificed in me? Why  
Is this my living body like a field  
Wasted with weeds, and nettles grow in it,  
And I have not the strength to pluck them up?  
Why is this done to me, immortal gods?

ELECTRA

The gods! but are you not yourself a goddess?  
You are as they are.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Do you understand  
What she is saying?

WAITING WOMAN

That you also are of  
The seed of gods.

# ELECTRA

TRAIN BEARER, *whispers*

She meant it knavishly.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *dropping her heavy eyelids*

It sounds familiar, and like a thing  
Forgotten long ago. She knows me well,  
Yet what she harbors in her no man knows.

[*The WAITING WOMAN and TRAIN  
BEARER whisper together.*]

ELECTRA

You are yourself no longer. Reptiles hang  
Upon you, what they hiss into your ear  
Sunders your thought within you, and you fall  
Into an ecstasy, and always now  
You are as in a dream.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I will go down.

Leave me, for I will speak with her. To-day  
She is not so curst. She speaks like a physician.  
The hours have all things mortal in their hand.  
In everything one aspect may be found  
Bearable even in things least bearable.

[*She leaves the window and comes to the  
door, the WAITING WOMAN by her side,  
the TRAIN BEARER behind her, torches be-  
hind them.*]

(*From the threshold.*) Why did you call me a  
goddess? Did you say it

[ 27 ]

## ELECTRA

In malice? Have a care. This day may be  
The last when you shall ever see the light  
Of day and breathe in freely the free air.

### ELECTRA

If you are not a goddess, of a truth,  
Who are the gods? There is nothing in the world  
That fills me with such shuddering as to think  
That body the dark door through which I crept  
Into the light of the world. Have I then lain  
Naked upon that lap, and to that breast  
Have you indeed lifted me? Then have I  
Crept from my father's grave, and played about  
In winding-sheets upon his judgment-place.  
Then you are a colossus, from whose hands  
Of brass I never issued. You have me hard  
Upon the bridle and you fetter me  
To what you will. You have cast up like the sea  
A father and a sister and a life.  
And you have sucked down under like a sea  
A father and a sister and a life.  
I know not how, unless you died before me,  
I should have leave to die.

### CLYTEMNESTRA

So much do you honor me? Is there yet a little  
Respect in you?

### ELECTRA

Much, much! What troubles you  
Troubles me likewise. Look you, why it irks me  
To see Ægisthus, who is your husband, wear

# ELECTRA

The cloak my father, who is dead, you know,  
And was the late king, wore. It irks me truly;  
I find it sits not well on him; it is  
Too wide across the shoulders.

## WAITING WOMAN

Is not the thing she means.                      The thing she says

## TRAIN BEARER

**False, every word.**

**CLYTEMNESTRA, to them scornfully**

I will hear nothing. That which comes from you  
Is but Ægisthus' breath. I will not check  
At all things. And if you will say to me  
What pleases me to hear, then will I hearken  
To what you say. The very truth of things  
That no man brings to light. There is on earth  
No man that knoweth how deep-hid a thing  
The truth is. Are there not in prison those  
That call Ægisthus murder-monger, me  
Murderess? And if I wake you in the night  
Do you not each give answer otherwise?  
Do you not cry out that my lids are swollen  
And I am sick within, and that all this  
Is but that I am sick? And then you whimper  
Into my other ear that you have seen  
Demons with long, sharp-pointed beaks suck out  
My blood, and point the marks out on my body.

## ELECTRA

And I, believing you, slay, slay, and slay  
Sacrifice upon sacrifice? Do you not  
Tear me to death with sayings and answerings?  
I will hear no more! This is truth, this is falsehood.  
If any should say pleasant things to me,  
Were it my daughter even, were it she there,  
Then will I from my soul take off all veils,  
And let the stir of the soft airs come in,  
Come whence it may come, as sick people do  
Who sit about a pool at eventide,  
Letting the cool air come upon their bodies,  
Fevered and foul, thinking about nothing  
Except about the comfort. So will I  
Begin now to make shift for my own self.  
Leave me alone with her.

*[She points the way into the house with  
her stick, impatiently, to her WAITING  
WOMEN and TRAIN BEARERS. THEY dis-  
appear lingeringly through the doorway.]*

*[The torches disappear with them, and only  
a faint light falls from inside the house  
across the inner court, and casts bars of  
shadow over the figures of the TWO  
WOMEN.]*

CLYTEMNESTRA, *after a pause*

I cannot sleep at night. Do you not know  
Some remedy for dreams?

ELECTRA, *coming nearer*

I, mother, I?

[ 30 ]

# ELECTRA

## CLYTEMNESTRA

Have you no other word to comfort me?  
Unloose your tongue. Ah, yes, I dream. We age,  
And as we age we dream. But that indeed  
Can be cast out. Why do you stand in the dark?  
We must make profit of the powers in us  
That now lie scattered. There are certain rites,  
There must be proper rites for everything.  
On how one utters a mere word or sentence  
Much may depend. And also on the hour,  
And whether one be full or fasting. Much  
Has come to pass because at the wrong hour  
One stepped into the bath.

## ELECTRA

Are you thinking then  
About my father?

## CLYTEMNESTRA

Therefore I am so  
Behung with precious stones. In every stone  
There lives for sure a virtue. But one needs  
To know the uses of them. If you would,  
I know that you could tell me what would aid me.

## ELECTRA

I, mother, I?

## CLYTEMNESTRA

Yes, you! For you are wise,  
Your head is sound and strong. You talk about  
Old things as if they happened yesterday.  
But I decay. I think. But one thought heaps

## ELECTRA

Itself upon another. And if I open  
My mouth, then cries Ægisthus, and what he cries  
Is hateful to me, and I would fain rise up,  
Be stronger than his words, and I find nothing.  
I find nothing! I do not even know  
Whether it was to-day he said that thing  
Which shook my soul with fury, or long ago.  
Then I grow dizzy and know nothing more,  
Not even who I am; and 't is that terror  
That hales me living into the abyss.  
And he, Ægisthus, mocks me, and I find  
Nothing. I find not some unspeakable thing  
To strike him silent and as pale as I  
Staring into the fire. But you have words.  
You could speak many things to bring me help.  
What if a word be nothing but a word?  
What is a breath? And yet there creeps a some-  
thing  
Over me as I lie, 'twixt night and day,  
With open eyes, and it is not a word,  
And not an agony, it does not crush,  
It does not choke me, but it lets me lie  
As I am lying, and beside me there  
Ægisthus lies and there — the curtain is.  
And all things look at me as if it were  
Out of eternity in to eternity,  
And it is nothing, not a nightmare even,  
And yet it is so terrible that my soul  
Hungers to hang itself, and every nerve  
Pants after death; and yet I live the while  
And am not even sick; look on me now:  
Am I like a sick woman? Can one perish  
Living, like a foul carcase, and decay,

## ELECTRA

Not being sick in anywise? Decay —  
With waking mind, like garments moths have  
eaten?

And then I sleep, and then I dream, and dream  
That all the marrow is molten in my bones  
And still I stagger on, and not the tenth  
Of an hour's running water has run out,  
And that which grins in underneath the curtain  
Is not yet the dun morning, no, but always  
Only the torch before the door, that starts  
Horribly like a living thing, and lies  
In wait against my sleep.  
I know not who they are that thus oppress me,  
And whether over us or under us  
Be their abode; but when I see you stand  
As now you stand before me, I can but think  
That you are also in the game with them.  
Only who are you then? You have not a word  
To say, now when one listens to you. How  
Shall it be help or hurt to any man  
Whether you live or die? Why do you look  
So hard upon me? I will not have you look  
Upon me so. These dreams must have an end.  
Whatever demon has been sent, shall leave us  
When the right blood is spilt.

ELECTRA

Whatever demon?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Though I should let the blood of every beast  
That creeps and flies, and in the steam of the  
blood

[ 33 ]



## ELECTRA

Stand up and go to sleep there as folk do  
In ultimate Thule in a blood-red mist,  
Yet will I dream no more.

ELECTRA

When there shall fall  
Under the axe the right blood-offering  
Then you shall dream no more.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *coming nearer*

Ah, then you know —  
With what horned beast —

ELECTRA

With an unhorned beast.

CLYTEMNESTRA

That lies within there bound?

ELECTRA

No, it goes free.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *eagerly*

And with what rites?

ELECTRA

Marvellous rites, that ask  
A strict observance.

[ 34 ]

# ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Speak them!

ELECTRA

Can you not

Divine them?

CLYTEMNESTRA

No, and therefore you I ask.

The name then of the offering?

ELECTRA

A woman.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *eagerly*

One of my women? Or a child? A maiden?  
A woman that has known men?

ELECTRA

Yes, known men:

That's it!

CLYTEMNESTRA

How then the offering, and what hour,  
And where?

ELECTRA

In any place, in any hour  
Of day or night.

[ 35 ]

# ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Tell me the rites, and tell me  
How they are served. Must I myself —

ELECTRA

This time  
You go not to the hunt with net and axe.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who then? Who offers it?

ELECTRA

A man.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Ægisthus?

ELECTRA, *laughs*

I said a man!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who? Answer. Of the house?  
Or must he be a stranger?

ELECTRA, *looking as if absently on the ground*

Yes, yes, a stranger.  
But surely of the house.

[ 36 ]

# ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Read me no riddles.  
Electra, hear me. You are not so stubborn  
To-day, and I am glad of it. When parents  
Are hard upon the child, it is the child  
That goads them into hardness. No harsh word  
Is quite irrevocable, and no mother  
If she sleeps ill, but would the rather think  
That her child lay in marriage-bed than bonds.

*ELECTRA, to herself*

How different with the child! that fain would think  
Her mother dead rather than in her bed.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What are you muttering? I say that there is  
nothing  
Irrevocable. Do not all things pass  
Before our eyes and vanish like a mist?  
And we ourselves, we too, we and our deeds,  
Deeds! We and deeds! And what mere words  
are those!  
Am I still she who did it? And if I am?  
Done, done! What kind of empty word is this  
You cast into my teeth? There stood he, whom  
You speak of always, there stood he and there  
Stood I and there Ægisthus, and from our eyes  
Our glances struck upon each other; yet  
Nothing had come to pass, and then there changed  
So slowly and so horribly in death  
Your father's eyes, still hanging upon mine;

[ 37 ]

## ELECTRA

And it had come to pass; nothing between!  
First it was coming, then it had gone by,  
And I had done, between coming and going,  
Nothing.

### ELECTRA

No, that which lies between, the act,  
That did the axe alone.

### CLYTEMNESTRA

How you cut in  
With words!

### ELECTRA

Yet not so fit nor yet so fast  
As you axe-thrust on axe-thrust.

### CLYTEMNESTRA

I will hear  
No more of this. Be silent. If your father  
Came to me here this day — as I with you  
So would I speak with him. It may well be  
That I would shudder, yet it may well be  
That I would weep and be as kind to him  
As if we were old friends that met together.

### ELECTRA, *to herself*

Horrible! she speaks of murder as if it were  
A squabble before supper.

[ 38 ]

# ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Tell your sister  
She need not run away into the dark  
Out of my sight, like any frightened dog.  
Tell her to greet me in more friendly wise,  
And talk with me in quiet. For in truth  
I know not why I should not give you both  
In marriage before winter.

ELECTRA

And our brother?  
Will you not let our brother come home, mother?

CLYTEMNESTRA

I have forbidden you to speak of him.

ELECTRA

You are afraid of him.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who says it?

ELECTRA

Mother,  
Now you are trembling.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who could be afraid  
Of a half-witted fellow?

[ 39 ]

# ELECTRA

ELECTRA

What?

CLYTEMNESTRA

  They say  
He stammers, lies about among the dogs,  
And cannot tell a wild beast from a man.

ELECTRA

The child was sound enough.

CLYTEMNESTRA

  They say he has  
A wretched dwelling, and the beasts of the yard  
For his companions.

ELECTRA

Ah!

CLYTEMNESTRA, *with lowered eyelids*

  I sent much gold  
And yet more gold that they should use him well,  
In all things as the son of a King.

ELECTRA

  You lie!  
You sent the gold that they might choke him  
with it.

[ 40 ]

# ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who told you that?

ELECTRA

I see it in your eyes,  
I see by how you tremble that he lives,  
And that you think of nothing, day or night,  
Except of him, and that your heart dries up  
With deathly dread because you know he comes.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Lie not. What's that to me who bides without  
The house? I live here and am mistress. Servants  
Enough I have, that watch before the doors  
And when I please I set by day and night  
Before my chamber door three watchers armed  
With open eyes. All this you tell me of  
I do not even hear. I do not even  
Know of what man you speak. And I shall never  
See him again: what is it to me to know  
If he be dead or living? In very deed  
I have had enough with dreaming of him. Dreams  
Are like a sickness, and break down the strength,  
And I will live and be the mistress here.  
I will not have such seizures of the soul  
As send me hither like a pedlar-woman  
To blab my nights out to you. I am as good  
As sick, and sick folk tattle of their ailments,  
That's all. But now I will be sick no longer.  
And I will wring one or another way (*she shakes  
her staff at ELECTRA*)

[ 41 ]



## ELECTRA

The right word out of you. You have already  
Told me you know the right blood-offering  
And the due rites to heal me. Say it not  
Free, you shall say it fettered. Say it not  
Full, you shall say it fasting. Dreams are things  
That we must rid ourselves of. He that suffers  
And finds no means of healing for himself  
Is nothing but a fool. I will find out  
Whose blood it is must flow, that I may sleep.

*ELECTRA, with a leap out of the darkness upon  
her, drawing nearer and nearer to her, more  
and more menacing*

What blood must flow? Out of your neck, your  
neck,  
When that is caught into the hunter's noose.  
He catches you, yet only in the chase,  
Who offers up a sacrifice in sleep?  
He hunts you on, he drives you through the house;  
And if you turn to right, there stands the bed,  
And if you turn to left, there foams the bath  
Like blood; the darkness and the torches cast  
Black-blood-red nets, the death-nets, over you!

*[CLYTEMNESTRA, shaking with speechless  
horror, would go into the house. ELEC-  
TRA pulls her towards her by her robe.  
CLYTEMNESTRA draws back towards the  
wall. Her eyes are wide open. Her staff  
falls from her trembling hands.]*

You would cry out, but the air strangles dead  
The unborn cry, and noiseless lets it fall  
Upon the ground, as in imagination

## ELECTRA

You reach your neck and feel the edge of the blade  
Draw near the seat of life. Yet still the blow  
Lingers; not yet are all the rites fulfilled.  
He draws you by the tresses of your hair,  
And all is silent, and your own heart you hear  
Knock at your ribs; this time (it widens out  
Before you like a dark abyss of years)  
This time is given that you may taste and know  
What agony is that of shipwrecked men  
When their vain cry devours the night of clouds  
And death; this time is given that you may envy  
All that are chained to prison-walls and cry  
In darkness from the bottom of a well  
For death as for deliverance; because you,  
You lie imprisoned in yourself as in  
The glowing belly of a brazen beast,  
And, even as now, cannot cry out. And I  
Stand there beside you, and you cannot take  
Your eyes from mine, and that which racks you is  
That you would read a word upon my face,  
A word that there stands silent; and you roll  
Your eyes, and you would catch at any thought,  
Would have the gods grin down out of the clouds;  
The gods, they are at supper, now as when  
You slew my father, still they sit at supper,  
And still they are deaf to any death-rattle.  
Only the half-crazed God of Laughter staggers  
In at the door; he thinks you would make sport,  
You and Ægisthus, at the shepherd's hour;  
But when he sees his error, of a sudden  
He laughs, loud-shrilling, and is gone in a trice.  
Then have you had your fill; then on your heart  
The gall drops bitter, then at the last gasp

## ELECTRA

You would call up one word, any mere word,  
A word only, instead of bloody tears  
The beast is not denied in death; and there  
I stand before you, and you read too late  
With rigid eyes the word unspeakable  
Written upon my face; because my face  
Is mingled of your features and my father's,  
And with my silent presence have I brought  
To nought your last word, for your soul indeed  
Has hanged itself within its self-slung noose,  
And now the axe falls crashing, and I stand  
Before you and I see you die at last.  
Then do you dream no more, then do I need  
To dream no more; whoever is living then,  
Let him rejoice because he is alive!

*[They stand eye to eye, ELECTRA in the wildest intoxication, CLYTEMNESTRA breathing horribly with fear. At this moment the entrance hall is lighted up, and the WAITING WOMAN comes out running. She whispers something in CLYTEMNESTRA'S ear. At first she seems not to understand. Gradually she comes to herself. She beckons: lights! SERVING WOMEN with torches come out and station themselves behind CLYTEMNESTRA. She beckons more lights! More come out and station themselves behind her, so that the court is full of light, and a red-gold glare floods the walls. Now the features of CLYTEMNESTRA slowly change, and their shuddering tension relaxes in an evil triumph. She lets the message be whispered to her*

## ELECTRA

*again, without taking her eyes off ELECTRA. Then the WAITING WOMAN lifts her staff, and, leaning on both, hurriedly, eagerly, catching up her robe from the step, she runs into the house. The SERVING WOMEN with the lights follow her, as if pursued.*

**ELECTRA, during this**

What are they saying to her? Why does she rejoice?

O my head! I can think of nothing. What  
Can give the woman pleasure?

*[CHRYSOthemis comes running to the door of the court, crying aloud like a wounded animal.*

**Chrysothemis!**

Quick! Your help! Tell me something in the  
world

That can give some one pleasure!

**CHRYSOthemis, shrieking**

**Orestes! Orestes!**

Is dead.

**ELECTRA, motions her away, as if beside herself**  
**Be silent!!**

**CHRYSOthemis, close to her**

**Orestes is dead.**

*[ELECTRA moves her lips.*

**[ 45 ]**

## ELECTRA

I came out, they all know it already. All  
Are standing round, and they all know it already.  
Only not we.

ELECTRA

No one knows it.

CHRYSOthemis

All know it.

ELECTRA

No one can know it, for it is not true.

[CHRYSOthemis *flings herself on the  
ground.*

(*Raising her.*) It is not true! I tell you so; I  
tell you  
It is not true.

CHRYSOthemis

The strangers stood beside the wall, the strangers  
Sent to bring tidings of it; there are two,  
An old man and a young man. They have told it  
To all of them already, and they all stand  
About them in a circle, and they all  
Know it already.

ELECTRA

It is not true.

[ 46 ]

# ELECTRA

CHRYSOthemis

To us

Only they do not tell it, only of us  
Does no man think. Dead, Electra, dead!

*[A YOUNG SERVING MAN comes hurriedly  
out of the house, and stumbles over those  
lying before the threshold.]*

YOUNG SERVING MAN

Room there! who hangs about a door like that?  
Would one have thought it? Hey there, grooms,  
I say!

*[The COOK comes from a doorway on R.]*

COOK

What is it?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

'T is a groom I split my lungs for,  
And lo! when some one crawls out of his kennel  
Why, it's the cook!

*[An OLD SERVING MAN with a gloomy  
face, appearing at the door of the court.]*

OLD SERVING MAN

What's wanted in the stable?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

Saddling's what's wanted, and as soon as may be.  
Do you hear? A nag, a mule, for aught I care  
A cow, but quickly.

[ 47 ]

# ELECTRA

OLD SERVING MAN

Who for?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

Why, for him

That orders it. No gapes! For me, but quick!  
At once! For me! Trot, trot! For I must out  
And off to field to fetch the master home;  
I have news for him, great news, weighty enough  
To ride a jade of yours to death for it.

[*The OLD SERVING MAN disappears.*]

COOK

What is the news? A word?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

A word, good cook,  
Would certainly instruct you little. Also  
To put it altogether in one word  
All that I know, and all I have to tell  
The master, would be difficult: enough  
To tell you that the news has newly come  
Of matters of the highest moment, news —  
The old fossil takes his time to saddle up! —  
Which, as a faithful servant of the household  
Should give you joy, whether you know 't or not,  
It 's all one, it should give you joy.

[*Shouting in the hall.*]

A whip,  
Rascal! do you think one rides without a whip?  
You keep me waiting and not I the nag. (*To the  
cook, preparing to rush out.*)

[ 48 ]

## ELECTRA

Well, in a word, then: the young lad Orestes,  
The son of the house, who never was at home,  
And thus as good as dead: this he, in short,  
Who, so to speak, was dead already, is  
Now, so to speak, really and truly dead. (*He  
rushes out.*)

*[The COOK, turning to ELECTRA and  
CHRYSOthemis, who lie pressed to each  
other like one body, which the sobs of  
CHRYSOthemis shake, and from which  
ELECTRA raises her death-pale silent face.*

### COOK

Ah! now I have it! Dogs howl to the moon  
When she is at her full; you howl because  
For you 't is always new-moon. Dogs, when they  
Trouble the peace of the house, are driven out.  
Take heed, lest it be so with you.

### CHRYSOthemis, half raising herself

Dead in a strange land, dead, and in his grave  
In a strange land! Struck from his horse, dragged  
Along the ground! Ah, and his face, they say,  
Not to be known. But that we never saw  
His face; for when we think of him we see him  
As when he was a child. He was a man.  
And did he long for us before he died?  
I could not question, there were so many  
Standing all round about them. Now, Electra,  
We must go in and talk with these two men.



# ELECTRA

*ELECTRA, to herself*

Now must the deed be done by us.

CHRYSOthemis

Electra,

We will go in; there are two of them, one old  
And one much younger; when they come to know  
That we are the two sisters, the poor sisters,  
Then they will tell us all.

ELECTRA

What is there now

That it can profit us to know? We know  
That he is dead.

CHRYSOthemis

That they should not have brought us even one  
look,  
One little lock of hair! As if we were  
No longer in the world, now, you and I!

ELECTRA

Therefore must we now show them that we are.

CHRYSOthemis

Electra?

ELECTRA

We! we both must do it.

[ 50 ]

# ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra?

What,

ELECTRA

Best to-day, and best to-night.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What, sister?

ELECTRA

What? The work that now on us  
Falls, because now he cannot come, and that  
Which is to do may not remain undone.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What is the work then?

ELECTRA

Now must you and I  
Go in and slay the woman and her husband.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Sister, you do not mean our mother?

[ 51 ]

# ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Her,  
And also him. This thing must now be done  
Without delay.

[CHRYSOthemis remains speechless.]

Be silent. There is nothing  
To say, nothing to think, but how? But how  
We are to do it.

CHRYSOthemis

I?

ELECTRA

Yes, you and I.  
Who else then? Has our father other children  
Hidden here in the house, and will they come  
And help us? No. So much at least I know.

CHRYSOthemis

Must both of us go in? Both of us two?  
And with our both hands?

ELECTRA

Let me look to that.

CHRYSOthemis

If you had even a knife —

[ 52 ]

# ELECTRA

ELECTRA, *contemptuously*

A knife —

CHRYSOthemis

Or even .

An axe —

ELECTRA

An axe! The axe wherewith our father —

CHRYSOthemis

You terror! What, you have it?

ELECTRA

For our brother  
I kept it. Now must we make use of it.

CHRYSOthemis

You, you, Electra! These arms slay Ægisthus?

ELECTRA

First him, then her: first her, then him; no matter.

CHRYSOthemis

I am afraid. You are beside yourself.

[ 53 ]

# ELECTRA

ELECTRA

They have no man to sleep before their door.

CHRYSOthemis

What, murder them in sleep, and then live on?

ELECTRA

The question is of him and not of us.

CHRYSOthemis

What can have put this madness in your head?

ELECTRA

A sleeping man is a bound offering.  
If these sleep not together I can do it.  
But you must come too.

CHRYSOthemis, *thrusting her away*

O Electra!

ELECTRA

You!

For you are strong. (*Close to her.*)

How strong you are! To you  
Have virgin nights given strength. How lithe and  
slim

Your loins are, you can slip through every cranny,  
Creep through the window. Let me feel your arms;  
How cool and strong they are! What arms they  
are

[ 54 ]

## ELECTRA

I feel when thus you thrust me back with them.  
Could you not stifle one with their embrace?  
Could you not clasp one to your cool firm breast  
With both your arms until one suffocated?  
There is such strength about you everywhere.  
It streams like cool close water from a rock,  
It flows in a great flood with all your hair  
Down your strong shoulders.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Let me go.

ELECTRA

No, no!

I hold you, and with my poor wasted arms  
I clasp your body, and if you resist  
You only draw the knot tighter about you.  
I will wind myself about you, I will sink  
My roots into you, and ingraft my will  
Into your blood.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Let me go! (*Escapes a few steps.*)

ELECTRA, *wildly after her, clinging to her dress*

No!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra!

Let me go!

[ 55 ]

# ELECTRA

## ELECTRA

I will not let you go.  
We must so grow together, that the knife  
That would cut off your life from mine, must deal  
Death to us both, for now are we alone  
Together in this world.

## CHRYSOthemis

Electra, hear me,  
You are so wise, help us to get free away,  
Help us to get free.

## ELECTRA, *without hearing her*

You are full of strength.  
You have sinews like a colt, your feet are slender,  
And I can halter you with both my arms.  
I feel through all the coolness of your skin  
The warm blood flowing, and against my cheek  
The down on your young arms: you are as a fruit  
The day it ripens. I will be your sister  
As I have never been your sister yet!  
I will sit beside you in your room  
And wait upon your bridegroom, and for him  
Will I anoint you, and you like a young swan  
Shall plunge into an odorous bath and hide  
Your head upon my breast, till he shall draw you  
With his strong arms (you glowing like a torch  
Through all your veils) into the marriage-bed.

# ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *shutting her eyes*

No, sister, no, speak no such words as that  
Within this house.

ELECTRA

Yes, I will from this day  
Be more than sister to you, I will serve you  
And I will be a slave to you. And if  
You be in travail I will stand beside  
Your bed by day and night, and I will ward  
The flies from off you, draw cool water for you:  
And if some day there lie upon your bosom  
A living thing, half fearful, I will lift it  
So high above you that its smile shall fall  
Into the deepest and most secret clefts  
Of your sad soul, and the last icy horror  
Shall melt before that sun and you shall weep  
Bright tears.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

O take me out of it! I die,  
I die in this house.

ELECTRA, *kneeling before her*

Your mouth is beautiful,  
Although it open only to be angry.  
Out of your clean, strong mouth there must come  
forth  
A terrible cry, terrible as the cry  
Of the Death goddess, when a man shall lie

[ 57 ]



## ELECTRA

As close to you as I do ; when a man  
Wakening shall see you standing at his head  
Like the Death goddess ; when a man shall lie  
Bound under you, and so look up at you,  
Up at your slender body with his eyes  
Rigid and set, as shipwrecked men look up  
At the high cliff above them, ere they die.

### CHRYSOthemis

What are you saying?

### ELECTRA, *rising*

What you have to do  
Before you escape this house and me.

[CHRYSOthemis *tries to speak.*

(*Putting her hand over her mouth.*) No way  
But this way. And I will not let you go  
Till you have sworn to me, mouth upon mouth,  
That you will do it.

### CHRYSOthemis, *freeing herself*

Let me go!

### ELECTRA, *seizing her again*

Then swear  
You will come to-night, when all is still, to the foot  
Of the staircase.

[ 58 ]

# ELECTRA

CHRYSOthemis

Let me go!

ELECTRA

Girl, no denial!

There's not a drop of blood that shall be left  
Upon your body; swiftly shall you slip  
Out of the bloody garment with clean body  
Into the bridal garment.

CHRYSOthemis

Let me go!

ELECTRA

Do not be such a coward! That which now  
Shakes you with shudderings shall reward you then  
With shudderings of rapture, night for night.

CHRYSOthemis

I cannot.

ELECTRA

Say that you will come.

CHRYSOthemis

I cannot.

ELECTRA

See, see, I lie before you. I kiss your feet.

[ 59 ]

3

# ELECTRA

CHRYSOthemis, *rushing to the inner door*

I cannot!

ELECTRA, *after her*

Be accursed!

(*To herself with determination.*) Then alone!

*[She begins to dig hurriedly at the wall of the house, beside the threshold, noiselessly, like an animal. She pauses, looks about her, and goes on digging.]*

*[ORESTES stands in the door of the court, showing black against the last rays. He comes in. ELECTRA looks at him. He turns slowly, until his glance falls upon her. ELECTRA starts violently and trembles.]*

What would you, stranger? What has sent you here

At the hour of dark to spy what others do?  
It may be you have something in your mind  
You would not any other spied upon.  
Therefore leave me in peace. I have a thing  
To do here. What is that to you? Go hence,  
And let me root about among the earth.  
Do you not follow me? or have you then  
A mind too curious? I bury nothing  
But something I dig up again. And not  
The death bones of a little child I buried  
A day or two ago. No, my good fellow,  
I have given life to nothing, I have nothing

## ELECTRA

To kill or bury. If the body of the earth  
Have taken anything out of my hands  
'Tis what I have come forth from, nothing, truly,  
That had come forth from me. I dig up something,  
And you shall scarcely pass out of this light  
Before I have and hug and kiss it over  
As if I held in it both my dear brother  
And my dear son, and both of them in one.

### ORESTES

Have you then nothing dear to you on earth  
That thus you scratch a something out of earth  
That you may kiss it? Are you quite alone?

### ELECTRA

I am no mother, and I have no mother,  
No sister am I, and I have no sister,  
I lie at the door and yet am not a watch-dog,  
I speak, and yet I hold no speech, I live  
And live not, have long hair and therewithal  
Feel nothing that they say all women feel;  
In short, I pray you, go and leave me! Leave me!

### ORESTES

I have to wait here.

### ELECTRA

Wait?

[*A pause.*

[ 61 ]

# ELECTRA

ORESTES

You are of the house?

One of the maids?

ELECTRA

I serve here in the house.

But what have you to do here? Go your way.

ORESTES

Did I not tell you I have to wait here  
Until they call for me?

ELECTRA

The folk within?

You lie. I know the master is from home.  
And what should *she* want with you?

ORESTES

I and one

Here with me have an errand to the lady.

[ELECTRA *is silent.*

We are sent to her because we can bear witness  
That we have seen her son Orestes die,  
Before our eyes, for his own horses killed him.  
I was as old as he, and his companion  
By day and night; the other, an old man,  
Who comes with me, had charge of both of us.

[ 62 ]

# ELECTRA

## ELECTRA

Why is it you I look on? Why must you  
Into my poor, sad corner trail yourself,  
O herald of misfortune? Can you not  
Trumpet your tidings forth where men rejoice?  
You live, and he, that was a better man  
And nobler thousandfold and thousandfold  
Wiser and weightier when he lived, is gone.  
Your both eyes stare at me and his are clay;  
Your mouth opens and shuts, and his is stopped  
With earth. Would I could stop yours with my  
curses!  
Get you out of my sight.

## ORESTES

What would you have?  
Here in the house they welcome it with joy.  
Let then the dead be dead. Let be Orestes.  
Orestes is now dead, and death must come  
To all, as to Orestes. He in his life  
Joyed over much; and the gods over us  
May not endure too clear a sound of joy,  
Too loud a rush of wings at evening  
They will not suffer, and they seize an arrow  
And nail the creature fast to the dim tree  
Of his dark fate, that has been long time growing  
For him in quiet. Thus had he to die.

## ELECTRA

How he can talk to one of Death, this fellow!  
As if he had tasted it, and spat it forth.  
But I, but I, that lie here and that know

## ELECTRA

The child will never come again, but they  
That are within, these live now and rejoice  
And all their breed shall live on in its hole  
And eat and drink and sleep and multiply,  
Whilst the child down in his deep pit of clay  
Longs for his father, and no father comes.  
And only I am here above, and not  
A beast in all the forest lives as I do,  
So monstrous and so lonely.

ORESTES

Who then are you?

ELECTRA

What's that to you who *I* am? have I asked  
Who *you* are?

ORESTES

I can only think one thing;  
You are of kindred blood with those who died  
With Agamemnon and Orestes?

ELECTRA

Kindred?  
I am that blood, that brutishly spilt blood  
Of the King Agamemnon. I am called  
Electra.

[ 64 ]

# ELECTRA

ORESTES

No!

ELECTRA

Why, he denies it me.

He flouts me and he takes from me my name.  
Because I have no father and no brother  
I am the laughing-stock of boys, the butt  
Of every fool that comes my way, and now  
They will not leave me even my name.

ORESTES

Electra

Is younger by ten years than you. Electra  
Is tall; her eyes are sad, yet soft, but yours  
Are full of blood and hatred. Electra dwells  
Apart from men, and all her day goes over  
In tending of a grave. Two or three women  
She has about her, silent helpers, beasts  
Glide shyly round her dwelling, and creep up  
Against her garment as she goes.

ELECTRA, *clapping her hands*

True! true!

Tell me more pretty stories of Electra  
And I will tell them to her, when — (*with choking  
voice*) I see her.

ORESTES

Do I then see her? Do I really see her?  
You! (*Hurriedly.*)

Have they let you starve then? Beaten you?

[ 65 ]



# ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Who are you with your many questions?

ORESTES

Tell me!

Tell me! Speak!

ELECTRA

Both! both! both! Queens do not thrive  
Fed on the refuse of the kitchen-heap,  
And priestesses were never made to bound  
Under the lash, and in such short poor rags  
Instead of flowing garments. Let my dress be;  
You shall not wallow in it with your eyes.

ORESTES

Electra!

What have you done, what have you done with your  
nights?  
Your eyes are terrible.

ELECTRA, *sullenly*

Go into the house.  
I have a sister in there, who may by now  
Be ready for the feast.

ORESTES

Electra, hear me!

[ 66 ]

# ELECTRA

## ELECTRA

I will not know who you are! you shall come  
No nearer to me. I will see no man. (*She cowers  
with her face against the wall.*)

## ORESTES

Listen! I have no time. Listen, I dare not  
Speak loud. Listen to me: Orestes lives.  
[ELECTRA *flings herself round.*  
Utter no sound. If you but make a movement  
You will betray him.

## ELECTRA

Is he free? where is he?  
You know where he is hidden? he is caught,  
And in some corner somewhere waits for death?  
I am to see him die, and you are sent  
That you may draw my soul as on a rack  
Up with a rope, and dash it to the ground.

## ORESTES

He is as sound as I am.

## ELECTRA

Then deliver him  
Before they kill him. Can you not give a sign?  
I kiss your feet; give him a sign, a sign!

[ 67 ]

## ELECTRA

I charge you by your father's corpse you run  
As swiftly as you can run and bring him forth.  
The child would die if he should pass one night  
Within this house.

ORESTES

Nay, by my father's corpse,  
For this thing came the child into the house  
That they this night should die who are to die.

ELECTRA, *struck by his tone*

Who are you?

*[The gloomy-faced OLD SERVANT comes noiselessly into the court, throws himself down before ORESTES, kisses his feet, rises, looks anxiously round, and goes noiselessly back.]*

ELECTRA, *scarcely controlling herself*

O, who are you? I am afraid.

ORESTES, *softly*

Do the dogs know me that are in the yard,  
And not my sister?

ELECTRA, *cries out*

Orestes! (*Throws herself in his arms and sobs.*)

[ 68 ]

# ELECTRA

ORESTES, *feverishly*

If any man  
Has heard you in the house, he holds my life  
Within his hand.

ELECTRA, *quite low, quiveringly*

Orestes! no man heard.  
O let my eyes look on you! Do not touch me.  
Go on your way. I am ashamed before you.  
I do not know how you can look at me.  
I am nothing but the corpse now of your sister,  
My poor child, and I know you shudder at me.  
And yet I was the daughter of a King.  
I think that I was beautiful; and when  
At night before my mirror, I blew out  
The lamp, I felt, and with a maiden thrill  
My naked body through the heavy night  
Shine, as a godly thing immaculate.  
I felt myself, as the thin moonbeams wrapt  
Me round in their white nakedness, as in  
A consecration, and my hair, such hair  
As men might tremble at, this hair now soiled  
And draggled and brought low: this! See, my  
brother,  
How I have offered up unto my father  
This thrill of soft delight. Do you think if I  
Had pleasure of my body, that his sighs  
Would not throng on me and his groans not  
throng  
About my bed? For jealous are the dead,  
And he has sent me hatred for a bridegroom,

## ELECTRA

Hollow-eyed hatred. And that horrible thing,  
Breathing a viperous breath, had I to take  
Into my sleepless bed, that it might teach me  
All that is done between a man and wife.  
The nights, woe's me, the nights when that I  
fathomed!

Then was my body cold as ice, yet charred  
As if with fire, and burning inwardly.  
And when at last, at last I knew it all,  
Then I was wise, and then the murderers —  
My mother, I mean, and he that is with her —  
Could not endure to look into my eyes.  
Why do you gaze at me so anxiously?  
Speak to me, speak! Why, your whole body  
trembles.

### ORESTES

My body? Let it tremble. Do you not think  
That he would tremble otherwise than this  
Could he but guess the way I mean to send him?

### ELECTRA

Then you will do it! You will do it alone?  
O you poor child, have you no friend with you?

### ORESTES

Speak nothing more of it. My foster father  
Is with me. Yet the doer shall be I.

# ELECTRA

ELECTRA

I have never seen the gods, only I know  
They will be with you there, and they will help you.

ORESTES

What the gods are, I know not. Yet I know  
That they have laid this deed upon my soul,  
And they will spurn me if I shudder at it.

ELECTRA

Then you will do it?

ORESTES

Yes. I must not look  
My mother in the eyes before I do it.

ELECTRA

Look upon me, what she has made of me.  
[ORESTES *looks at her sadly.*  
O child, O child, stealthily have you come,  
And speaking of yourself as of one dead,  
And yet you are alive!

ORESTES, *softly*

Take heed!

ELECTRA

Who then  
Am I that you should cast such loving looks  
Upon me? See, I am nothing. All I was

[ 71 ]

## ELECTRA

I have had to cast away: even that shame  
Which is more sweet than all things, and like a mist  
Of milky silver round about the moon  
Is about every woman, and wards off  
Things evil from her soul and her. My shame  
I have offered up, and I am even as one  
Fallen among thieves, who rend off from my body  
Even my last garment. Not without bridal-night  
Am I, as other maidens are; I have felt  
The pangs of child-bearing; yet have brought  
forth

Nothing into the world, and I am now  
Become a prophetess perpetually,  
And nothing has come forth out of my body  
But curses and despair. I have not slept  
By night, I have made my bed upon the tower,  
Cried in the court, and whined among the dogs.  
I have been abhorred, and have seen everything,  
I have seen everything as the watchman sees  
Upon the tower, and day is night and night  
Is day again, and I have had no pleasure  
In sun or stars, for all things were to me  
As nothing for his sake, for all things were  
A token to me, and every day to me  
A milestone on the road.

ORESTES

O my sister!

ELECTRA

What will you do?

[ 72 ]

# ELECTRA

ORESTES

Sister, is not our mother

Like you?

ELECTRA, *wildly*

Like me? No, no. But you are not  
To look her in the face. When she is dead  
We'll look into her face together. Brother,  
She cast a white shirt round about our father  
And then she struck at that which lay before her  
Helpless and without eyesight, and his face  
He could not turn to her nor set his arms free —  
Do you hear me? — *that* she struck with axe  
uplifted  
High over him.

ORESTES

Electra!

ELECTRA

What her face is  
Her deeds have made it.

ORESTES

I will do the deed,  
And I will do it quickly.

ELECTRA

Happy is he  
Dares do the deed! The deed is like a bed  
On which the soul reposes, like a bed

[ 73 ]



## ELECTRA

Of balsam, where the soul can take its rest,  
The soul that is a wound, that is a blight,  
A-running and a-burning.

*[The FOSTER FATHER of ORESTES stands  
in the door of the inner hall, a strong gray-  
beard with flashing eyes.]*

Brother, who is this?

FOSTER FATHER, *hastily to them*

Are you both mad? You do not better bridle  
Your lips, when now a breath, a noise, a nothing  
Might ruin us and our work.

ELECTRA

Who is this man?

ORESTES

You do not know him? If you love me, thank him.  
Thank him that I am here. This is Electra.

ELECTRA

You! You! O now it is all real, and all  
Safe and fast-knotted! Let me kiss your hands.  
I know not if the gods are, I know not  
Anything of the gods: therefore the rather  
I kiss your hands.

FOSTER FATHER

Be still, be still, Electra.

[ 74 ]

# ELECTRA

## ELECTRA

No, I will make rejoicing over you,  
Because you have brought him hither. When I  
hated

Then I kept ample silence. Hate is nothing,  
It wastes and wastes itself away, and love  
Is lesser even than hate, it grasps at all things  
And can take hold on nothing, and its hands  
Are flames that take no hold on anything;  
All thought is nothing, and as the powerless air  
Is everything that comes out of the mouth:  
Blessed alone is he that does his deed,  
Blessed is he who touches him, and digs  
The axe out of the earth for him, and holds  
The torch for him, and opens the door wide  
For him, and he who listens at the door.

FOSTER FATHER, *seizes her roughly and lays  
his hand over her mouth*

Silence! (*To ORESTES, precipitately.*)

She waits for you. Her women come  
To seek you. There is no man in the house,  
Orestes!

[ORESTES *draws himself up, subduing his  
dread. The door of the house is lighted  
up, and a SERVING WOMAN appears  
with a torch; behind her the WAITING  
WOMAN. ELECTRA has sprung back, and  
stands in the darkness. The WAITING  
WOMAN makes obeisance before the TWO  
STRANGERS, and signs to them to follow*

[ 75 ]

## ELECTRA

*her. The SERVING WOMAN fastens the torch into an iron ring in the door-post. ORESTES and his FOSTER FATHER go in. ORESTES shuts his eyes for a moment, as if dizzy; the FOSTER FATHER is close behind him, they exchange a quick glance.*

*[The door shuts behind them.*

*[ELECTRA is left alone in intolerable suspense. She runs to and fro before the door with bowed head, like a wild beast in its cage. Suddenly she stands still and says*

### ELECTRA

I have not given him the axe.

They have gone in, and I have not given him the axe!

There are no gods in heaven.

*[Once more a fearful waiting. There is heard from within, shrilly, the cry of CLYTEMNESTRA. ELECTRA shrieks like a demon.*

Strike again!

*[A second cry from within. From the SERVANTS' quarters on L. comes CHRYSOTHEMIS and a troop of SERVING WOMEN. ELECTRA stands in the door, her back against it.*

### CHRYSOTHEMIS

Something has happened!

[ 76 ]

# ELECTRA

## FIRST WAITING WOMAN

She cries out in her sleep  
Like that.

## SECOND WAITING WOMAN

There must be men within. I hear  
The feet of men.

## THIRD WAITING WOMAN

They have bolted all the doors.

## FOURTH WAITING WOMAN

It is murder, there is murder in the house.

## FIRST WAITING WOMAN, *cries out*

O!

## ALL

What is it?

## FIRST WAITING WOMAN

Don't you see!  
There is some one at the door.

## CHRYSOthemis

It is Electra. O, it is Electra!

[ 77 ]

# ELECTRA

## SECOND WAITING WOMAN

Why then does n't she speak?

## CHRYSOthemis

Electra, why

Do you not speak?

## FIRST WAITING WOMAN

I will go and fetch men. (*Runs out to L.*)

## CHRYSOthemis

Electra,

Open the door.

## OTHERS

Let us into the house,

Electra!

[FIRST WAITING WOMAN, coming back  
*through the door of the court.*

## FIRST WAITING WOMAN

Back!

[ALL start.

Ægisthus! Back to our quarters,  
Quickly. Ægisthus is coming through the court.  
If he finds us and finds out what has happened  
In the house, he will kill us.

[ 78 ]

# ELECTRA

ALL

Back, quickly, come back!  
[ÆGISTHUS at the entrance on R.]

ÆGISTHUS

Is no one here to light me? None of all  
The rascals stirring? Shall we never teach  
These people manners?

[ELECTRA takes the torch out of the ring,  
runs down towards him, and bows before  
him.]

(Starting at the indistinct figure in the flickering  
light and stepping back.) What is this weird  
woman?

I have forbidden any unknown face  
To come into my presence.

(Recognizing her, angrily.) What, is it you?  
Who bade you come to meet me?

ELECTRA

May I not light you?

ÆGISTHUS

Well, well, this news concerns you more than any.  
Where shall I find the strangers who have brought  
These tidings of Orestes?

ELECTRA

They are within.  
A kindly hostess have they found, and find  
Their entertainment with her.

[ 79 ]

# ELECTRA

ÆGISTHUS

Have they brought  
True tidings of his death, tidings that are  
Not to be doubted?

ELECTRA

Lord, these tidings are  
No hollow words but tokens bodily,  
Tokens it is impossible to doubt.

ÆGISTHUS

What have you in your voice, what has come to you  
That you will speak to me out of your mouth?  
Why do you stagger about there with your light?

ELECTRA

Merely for this, that I have become wise  
At last, and turn to them that are the stronger.  
Have I your leave to light you?

ÆGISTHUS

To the door.  
Why are you dancing? Have a care, there!

*ELECTRA, circling him in a weird dance, and  
suddenly making a deep bow to him*

Mind,  
The steps! You'll fall.

# ELECTRA

ÆGISTHUS

Why is there no light here?

Who are these?

ELECTRA

They are those, Lord, that desire  
To wait on you in person. And I, who have  
By my unseasonable and bold approach  
Often been irksome to you, now at last  
Will learn, at the right moment, to withdraw.

[ÆGISTHUS goes into the house.

[A short silence. At the same moment  
ÆGISTHUS, at a little window on R., tears  
away the curtain and cries

ÆGISTHUS

Help! murder! help your master! murder! murder!  
Help! they are murdering me!

[He is dragged away.

Does no one hear me?

No one hear me?

[His face appears again at the window.

ELECTRA, drawing herself up

Agamemnon hears you!

ÆGISTHUS, dragged away

Woe's me!

[ELECTRA stands back breathing fear-  
fully, turned towards the house. The

[ 81 ]



# ELECTRA

*WOMEN run out wildly. CHRYSOTHEMIS among them. Unwittingly they run forward to the door of the outer court. Then they stop suddenly and turn back.*

## CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra! Sister! come with us!  
Come with us now! Our brother is in the house,  
Is it Orestes who has done it?

*[Confusion of VOICES, turmoil without.*

*Come!*

He is in the outer hall, they are all about him,  
They kiss his feet; and all of them that hated  
Ægisthus in their hearts have fallen upon  
The others, everywhere in all the court  
The dead are lying, all who live are drenched  
With blood, they wound themselves, they beam,  
they all  
Embrace each other —

*[Outside the noise increases, the WOMEN run out. CHRYSOTHEMIS is left alone. Light from without penetrates within.*

And shout with joy and kindle  
A thousand torches. Do you hear? Do you hear?

## ELECTRA, crouching on the threshold

Do you think I do not hear? Do I not hear  
Music within me? The thousands who bear torches  
And whose unbounded myriad footsteps make  
A hollow rumbling over all the earth,

## ELECTRA

All wait upon me, and well I know they wait  
That I may lead the dance; and yet I cannot  
Because the ocean, the vast manifold  
Ocean, lays all its weight on every limb;  
I cannot raise myself from under it.

CHRYSTHEMIS, *almost shrieking with  
excitement*

Do you not hear, they carry, they carry him  
Upon their hands, their faces are all changed,  
All eyes, and the old cheeks glisten with tears.  
All weep, do you not hear them? — Ah!

*[She runs out.]*

*[ELECTRA has raised herself. She steps  
down from the threshold, her head thrown  
back like a Maenad. She lifts her knees,  
stretches out her arms; it is an incredible  
dance in which she steps forward.]*

*[CHRYSTHEMIS appearing again at the  
door, behind her torches, a THRONG, faces  
of MEN and WOMEN.]*

Electra!

ELECTRA, *stands still, gazing at her fixedly*

Be silent and dance. Come hither all of you!  
Join with me all! I bear the burden of joy,  
And I dance before you here. One thing alone  
Remains for all who are as happy as we;  
To be silent and dance.

*[She does a few more steps of tense tri-  
umph, and falls a-heap. CHRYSTHEMIS*

# ELECTRA

*runs to her. ELECTRA lies motionless.*  
*CHRYSOthemis runs to the door of the*  
*house and knocks.*

CHRYSOthemis

Orestes! Orestes!

[*Silence.*

CURTAIN

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21.  
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